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## THE STORY OF PHRIXOS AND MODERN FOLKLORE.

THE story of Phrixos, his sister Helle, and their marvellous flight to the far-off country on the shores of the Pontos, is well known on account of its connection with the expedition of the Argonauts in search of the golden fleece. It is recorded by Apollodoros in the following words :<sup>1</sup>

“ Of the sons of Aiolos, Athamas, ruler of Boiotia, became by Nephele the father of two children, Phrixos a boy and Helle a girl. Again he married Ino, of whom were born to him Learchos and Melikertes. Ino, plotting against the children of Nephele, persuaded the women to parch the wheat. They took it without the knowledge of the men and did so. The earth receiving wheat that was parched failed to give her yearly crops. Consequently Athamas sent to Delphoi to ask how he could be rid of this barrenness. But Ino induced the messengers whom he had sent to declare that, according to the oracle, the curse upon the crops would be removed if Phrixos were sacrificed to Zeus. Athamas, hearing this, was compelled by the inhabitants of the land to obey, and set Phrixos beside the altar. But Nephele caught him up along with her daughter, and, having obtained from Hermes a ram with a golden fleece, gave it to them. Carried by the ram through the sky, they traversed land and sea. But, when they were over the sea that lies between Sigeion and the Chersonesos, Helle slipped off into the deep ;

<sup>1</sup> *Bibl.* i. 9, 1 f. I utilize the translation of Arthur B. Cook, *Zeus*, Cambridge, 1914, p. 415. An almost identical account is found in Tzetzes in *Lyk. Al.* 22 ; Zenob. iv. 38 ; Eudok. *viol.* 342, 478 ; Hyginus, *fab.* 2 f.

and, as she perished there, the sea was called Hellespontos after her. Phrixos came to the Kolchoi, whose king was Aietes, son of the Sun-god and of Perseis, and brother of Kirke and Pasiphae the wife of Minos. Aietes welcomed him and gave him Chalkiope, one of his daughters. Phrixos slew the ram with the golden fleece as a sacrifice to Zeus and Phrixos gave its skin to Aietes; he nailed it round an oak-tree in a grove of Ares. . . ."

The oldest version of the myth that has come down to us in its entirety is that of Sophokles, and presents some noteworthy variants. According to it Athamas deserted the goddess Nephele and married instead a mortal woman. Nephele, out of jealousy, punished him by sending a drought. The messengers sent to Delphoi are bribed by the stepmother, and the children are about to be fetched from the flocks, when a ram speaking with a human voice, warns them of the danger. They flee on the ram. Helle is drowned, Phrixos gets safely to the Kolchoi. The ram is sacrificed after having become golden-fleeced by the agency of the gods. The stepmother is not named.<sup>1</sup>

Apollodoros and the scholiast on the *Iliad*<sup>2</sup> say nothing about Helle's being about to be sacrificed, while, according to the scholiast on Aristophanes,<sup>3</sup> that on Apollonios Rhodios,<sup>4</sup> Pausanias<sup>5</sup> and Zenobios,<sup>6</sup> both brother and sister are to die on the altar. According to one passage of Hyginus,<sup>7</sup> Phrixos offers himself as a sacrifice on the occasion of a drought which afflicts his father's country.

Georg Wissowa<sup>8</sup> draws the conclusion that the versions according to which Phrixos alone is to be the victim are

<sup>1</sup> Schol. Aristoph. *Nub.* 257; Apostol. xi. 58; Eudok. *viol.* 28; cf. also Schol. Aisch. *Pers.* 70.

<sup>2</sup> vii. 86.

<sup>3</sup> *Nub.* 257.

<sup>4</sup> Schol. on Apollonios Rhodios, *Argonaut.* ii. 653.

<sup>5</sup> *Descr. Gr.* ix. 34, 5.

<sup>6</sup> iv. 38.

<sup>7</sup> *Fab.* 2; also according to the schol. on Pindar, *Pyth.* iv. 288.

<sup>8</sup> Pauly, *Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, ed. by G. Wissowa, Halbband, xv. cc. 159-162.

nearer the original myth than the others, and this conclusion is undoubtedly correct, Helle having been introduced into the story evidently in order to die and to give a name to a part of the sea.

Concerning the cause of the drought, the same scholar believes that the story of Sophokles presents a more natural and therefore more primitive motivation. In his opinion the plot of the original myth was essentially that of the jealousy of the heavenly wife of Athamas, a widely known motif, out of which developed the younger form which put the figure of the wicked stepmother in the foreground. The *märchen* motif of *Brüderchen und Schwesterchen*<sup>1</sup> was of influence in creating the figure of Helle. Wissowa also thinks it probable that in the original myth the oracle really demanded the sacrifice of Phrixos and that Zeus substituted a ram for him, just as Artemis substituted a hind for Iphigeneia. This is also the opinion of Arthur B. Cook.<sup>2</sup>

What has not been pointed out heretofore is that the whole tale of the child warned and saved by a magic ram, who carries him to a foreign country where he wins honours and riches, and generally the hand of a beautiful princess, is a *märchen* type of no uncommon occurrence among the people of Europe and Western Asia, and that it was this *märchen* type which from the very beginning shaped the story of Phrixos and caused it to take a different development from analogous substitution tales such as those of Iphigeneia and Isaac.

Let us put together the traits in the Phrixos story which belongs to that type.

1. A child is persecuted by an evil stepmother.
2. When it is about to be killed it is warned by an animal.
3. The animal saves the child and provides it with treasure.

<sup>1</sup> Grimm, *Kinder-u.-Hausmärchen*, No. 11.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.* i. 417.

4. With the help of the animal, or the treasure, or both, the child makes an honourable match in a foreign country.

The type in question is generally known by Grimm's tale *Einäuglein, Zweiäuglein und Dreiäuglein*.<sup>1</sup> In some of the existing variants the stepchild is a girl, in others it is a boy.<sup>2</sup> There are two children, a boy and a girl, in an Arabic<sup>3</sup> and a Kabyle tale.<sup>4</sup> In some versions the stepmother simply illtreats the child, in others she plans to kill it.<sup>5</sup> In most stories of this type it is however not the child that is to be killed, but the helpful animal.<sup>6</sup> It is possible that this is a mitigation of an older, cruder form where the child is to be slaughtered.

Before the day when the child's fate is to take a tragic turn, generally by being deprived of its animal friend, the animal warns it, and they flee together. This is the case in a Danish,<sup>7</sup> a Norwegian,<sup>8</sup> an English,<sup>9</sup> a French,<sup>10</sup> an Icelandic<sup>11</sup> and several East European<sup>12</sup> versions. With the help of the animal the fugitive succeeds in freeing

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.* No. 130; cf. Bolte-Polívka, *Anmerkungen*, iii. 60-66; A. Aarne, *Verzeichnis der Märchentypen*, Helsinki, 1910, p. 23, type 511.

<sup>2</sup> Bolte-Polívka, iii. 65-66.

<sup>3</sup> René Basset, *Contes populaires d'Afrique*, Paris, 1903, p. 102.

<sup>4</sup> J. Rivière, *Recueil des contes populaires de la Kabylie du Djurdjura*, Paris, 1882, p. 67.

<sup>5</sup> In the version of Martin Montanus, as outlined by Bolte-Palívka, iii. 61, the stepmother drives the child into a wild forest and abandons it there.

<sup>6</sup> Grimm, *op. cit.* No. 130; cf. also Bolte-Polívka, *op. et loc. cit.*

<sup>7</sup> E. T. Kristensen, *Danske folkeeventyr*, Viborg, 1888, i. 57, No. 8: *Den liden guldske*.

<sup>8</sup> G. W. Dasent, *Popular Tales from the Norse*, New York, 1888, p. 357: *Katie Woodencloak*.

<sup>9</sup> *The Red Calf*, *Folk-Lore Journal*, ii. 1884, p. 72.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Sébillot, *Contes populaires de la Haute-Bretagne*, Paris, 1880, i. 15, No. 3.

<sup>11</sup> A. Rittershaus, *Die neuisländischen Volksmärchen*, Halle, 1902, p. 36, No. viii.: *Rauðiboli*.

<sup>12</sup> Bolte-Polívka, iii. 66.

a princess from a monster,<sup>1</sup> or obtains costly clothes<sup>2</sup> with which the heroine wins the hand of a prince.

In another group of tales the animal does not escape its fate, but is killed by the stepmother. Before dying, it bids the hero or heroine sow its entrails or bones in the ground, and a marvellous tree bearing golden fruit arises, which assures the happiness of the heroine.<sup>3</sup>

In a large number of versions the animal provides the children with food,<sup>4</sup> in others with clothing;<sup>5</sup> in still others it helps the girl in fulfilling an impossible task imposed upon her by the stepmother.<sup>6</sup>

The helpful animal is generally a bull<sup>7</sup> or a cow,<sup>8</sup> sometimes a ram,<sup>9</sup> rarely a horse.

This exposition will make it clear that the story of Phrixos belongs to the *märchen* type of *Einäuglein, Zweiäuglein und Dreiäuglein*. Next the question must be answered, How did the Greek myth arise, and how did Phrixos come to be connected with this fairy tale?

The basis of the Phrixos story is undoubtedly an Old Greek belief of holding the king responsible for the failure of the crops. The result was that the king was sacrificed to mitigate the wrath of the gods whenever a famine threatened.<sup>10</sup> Sir J. G. Frazer, in his *Golden Bough*, collected

<sup>1</sup> Rittershaus, *op. et loc. cit.*

<sup>2</sup> Kristensen, *op. et loc. cit.*

<sup>3</sup> Grimm, *op. cit.* No. 130; cf. Bolte-Polívka, *op. et loc. cit.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> J. Haltrich, *Deutsche Volksmärchen aus dem Sachsenlande in Siebenbürgen*, Wien, 1885, p. 153, No. 36: *Das Zauberhorn*.

<sup>7</sup> In the stories of Dasent, Haltrich, Kristensen, Rittershaus and Sébillot, to mention a few.

<sup>8</sup> In the story of Basset quoted above and in several Italian versions cited by Bolte-Polívka, iii. 64.

<sup>9</sup> Reinhold Köhler, *Kl. Schr.*, Berlin, 1900, i. 258, 272; Paul Sébillot, *Contes populaires de la Haute-Bretagne*, Paris, 1881, oo. 167, No. 29.

<sup>10</sup> Sir J. G. Frazer, in his commentary on Pausanias, v. 172, adduces evidence which tends to show that the Phrixos story did not originate in an emergency sacrifice, but in a regular immolation of the eldest son of the king or prince; cf. also Frazer, *The Dying God*, p. 161.

examples for this barbarous custom from all over the earth.<sup>1</sup> Traces of it are found in Snorre's *Heimskringla*<sup>2</sup> and in *Early Irish Lives of Saint Patrick*.<sup>3</sup> Later, when the inconveniences of this system began to dawn upon both king and people, it was held sufficient to sacrifice a substitute, who, at first, very naturally was the king's son.<sup>4</sup> Still later, an outlaw or criminal took this place, and finally an animal was substituted for a human being. Thus Isaac and Iphigeneia are saved by the substitution of a ram or a hind. This undoubtedly was the stage of the Phrixos myth before its connection with the Argonaut story, which was a consequence of Greek colonization on the shores of the Pontos. Once Phrixos was said to have come to the Kolchoi, an explanation had to be found of how he got there, and then the *märchen* type under discussion offered the best and most logical solution. All these stages are clearly distinguishable in the different Greek versions. In a passage of Hyginus,<sup>5</sup> and in the scholion on Pindar, based on the version of Pherekydes, one of the oldest writers on Greek legendary history; Phrixos offers himself voluntarily. In Sophokles, the drought is not caused by the stepmother, who is not even named, but is what may be called a "natural" occurrence, the work of the higher powers. However, the connection with the Argonaut story has already taken place, and the *märchen* motif has been adopted. The stepmother plots the death of her stepson. The *märchen* itself has

<sup>1</sup> *The Magic Art and the Evolution of Kings*, London, 1913, i. 335, 366, 396 ff.; *Adonis, Attis, Osiris*, London, 1914, i. 21, 110, 183; ii. 154, 163, 266.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. E. H. Meyer, *Mythologie der Germanen*, Strassburg, 1903, p. 336.

<sup>3</sup> Whitley Stokes, *The Tripartite Life of Patrick*, London, 1887, p. clix.

<sup>4</sup> Sir J. G. Frazer, *The Dying God*, London, 1914, pp. 160 ff.; *Spirits of the Corn and the Wild*, London, 1914, pp. 13, 24 f.

<sup>5</sup> *Fab.* 2; cf. also note 8.

however not yet become an integral part of the original story, for the ram is not suddenly substituted by Zeus for the human victim, but it is a ram of Athamas' flock which warns Phrixos, just as in the North and Central European tales the ram or bull is a member of the herd that has been entrusted to the care of the hero or heroine. The metamorphosis does not take place till they are well on their way to the Kolchoi, when by the agency of the gods the ram suddenly becomes golden-fleeced. In Apollodoros we see the legend in its final form: the animal is no longer the good helper of the stepchild, but the marvellous gift from the gods, for both Phrixos' mother and Hermes are summoned to explain its miraculous faculties.

A word might perhaps be said why the helpful animal happens to be a bull, cow, or ram, in the ancient myth as well as in the modern folk-tales. As was pointed out by Arthur B. Cook,<sup>1</sup> both bull and ram are to a primitive people the animals of fertility *par excellence*; they are the givers of wealth and fruitfulness. No wonder, then, that the orphan children should find unexpected succour in their father's flock, that a bull, cow, or ram should help them when no other helper is near.

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<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.* i. 429, 430, 501, 634, 717.